

## **MUSEUM DISTRICT WALK PROJECT FIRST TOWN HALL MEETING**

February 6, 2003, 6:00-8:30 pm  
St. Paul's United Methodist Church

### **PROJECT OVERVIEW**

The Museum District Walk Project aims to enhance the pedestrian experience and to improve pedestrian accessibility between museums, attractions like Hermann Park and Miller Outdoor Theater, and transit services located within the Museum District area. This project, funded by the Federal Highway Administration, will establish a blueprint for streetscape improvements on Bissonnet/Binz streets, develop streetscape prototypes for the area bound by Southmore, Almeda, Hermann Drive and Bayard and Montrose, and strengthen the identity of the Museum District.

### **TOWN HALL MEETING OVERVIEW**

The February 6 Town Hall meeting is the Museum District Walk Project kick off event where the public, stakeholders, and interested parties meet the selected design team and are presented with an overview of the project that included: introduction, City's Assistant Planning Director Patricia Rincon-Kallman; project overview, Houston Museum District Administrator Susan Young; project goals, schedule and introduction of design team, SLA Design Team principal in charge Keiji Asakura; and public involvement process and walkability tours, SLA Design Team member Charlie Gandy.

Following the presentation there was a period of questions and answers. Upon concluding questions and answers participants were invited to provide further feedback about particular areas of interest and concern by marking up area maps located at the Town Hall meeting. Furthermore, a survey soliciting preferences and demographic information was also issued to participants, as part of the effort to gain insight into their issues, ideas, and concerns.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The meeting was introduced by Patricia Rincon-Kallman, Assistant Director, City of Houston Planning & Development Department. She indicated that the Museum District Walk Project is part of infrastructure enhancements that the City has been implementing as part of the Main Street improvement process. The Museum District Walk Project aims to enhance pedestrian safety and accessibility to the future light rail station currently being constructed by Metro. The project also intends to improve the overall streetscape appearance of the Museum District. The Museum District Walk Project is being funded by the Federal Highway Administration and will be implemented as a pilot project with the expectation that it will set the tone to future improvements to the Museum District.

### **PROJECT BACKGROUND**

Susan Young, President of the South Main Center Association and representing the Houston Museum District, provided general background leading to the Museum District Walk Project. Prior design activities have already identified general design opportunities and constraints found at the Museum District. The SLA Design Team as a frame of reference will use these findings for the Museum District Walk Project. The challenge and opportunity is to create a streetscape design that can be implemented through out the Museum District thus connecting public spaces

with the many institutions located in the District. The project covers sixteen museums that attract over 5 million visitors annually.

## **PROJECT DESIGN AND DESIGN TEAM**

Keiji Asakura, Principal in charge of the SLA Design Team, introduced design team members such as: Charlie Gandy of Liveable Communities Consulting, located in Austin, Texas, but conducts pedestrian audits through out the nation; Gonzalo Camacho, traffic engineer and project manager and Principal of Camacho & Associates; architects Rafael Longoria and Patrick Peters from Longoria/Peters, urban planners and in charge of identifying public art opportunities; and Craig Minor from Minor Design, a graphics design company. Asakura emphasized that the project presents wonderful and unique opportunities to enhance the quality of living environment in the Museum District and for Houston residents as well as visitors to experience. The Museum District Walk Project is a streetscape design project that aims to focus on pedestrian experiences and extending the quality of its museums into the outdoors.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND WALKABILITY TOURS**

Public involvement is a very important element of the design process. Charlie Gandy will conduct several “Walkability Tours” or pedestrian audits in order to allow stakeholders to experience walking in the district as a foundation to provide the design team recommendations from their personal observations. Charlie Gandy presented examples and images of pedestrian-friendly improvements found around the country. This provided participants clear examples of how streetscape design can turn typical and problem streets into safe, engaging, and attractive pedestrian zones. Gandy indicated that design elements in public spaces can be concrete means of making the public realm more liveable.

## **QUESTION AND ANSWERS**

Following Charles Gandy’s presentation Susan Young conducted the questions and answers segment of the Town Hall meeting. Following are the questions and answers provided:

### **Mecom Fountain is in need of restoration. How can we fix them?**

The restoration of the Mecom Fountain is complex but it is not within the scope of this project. Funding for such improvements must be identified from both public and private sources. This Museum District project is focused on the Binz/Bissonnet corridor. The study will generate information relevant to improvements around the fountains, but further work will be required to fully address the repairs and improvements called for at this wonderful landmark. A request was made to search for potential benefactors.

### **How does this integrate land use with transportation improvements?**

The project can create “landing zones” or “pedestrian moments” which are key locations lending themselves, by location and character, to pedestrian accessibility improvements. These locations will improve streetscape and the ability of public spaces to serve existing land uses and future uses. Working with private concerns can identify new appropriate uses. Establishment of the light rail stations on San Jacinto and Fannin streets, south of Binz, and their intrinsic connection to the rest of the rail line mean that new and improved means of accessing the area are becoming

a reality. The pedestrian improvements discussed will enhance the value of transit rail connections to the entire Museum District covered by the project's design area.

**Thinking into the future, with 16 museums located over a large area, perhaps graphics are the means to connect them. Is there a plan to expand the project within this entire area?**

The Museum District Walk Project, while centered along the Binz/Bissonnet corridor, takes into considerations the overall Museum District area which covers: the Menil Collection, Center for Contemporary Crafts, Buffalo Soldiers Museum and the Rice Art Gallery/Rice University. This is a wide area with many and diverse land uses, including various major institutions, large and small residences, and a wide variety of businesses. The *design area* of the project (as shown on the map) is the Bissonnet/Binz corridor, from Bayard to Crawford. The project *study area* includes all of the museums in the district and includes the areas between Southmore and Hermann, Bayard and Almeda streets.

**Will the project include Buffalo Soldier Museum and improve sidewalks between the MFA area and the Buffalo Soldier Museum? There are leaks in newly paved streets. What about future maintenance?**

Although the project will not implement sidewalk improvements beyond the Binz/Bissonnet streets it will identify pedestrian accessibility issues and provide street improvement prototypes for future improvements to streetscape and pedestrian access in the Museum District area. The Buffalo Soldier Museum is located within the project area and prototypical designs developed during the Museum District Walk Project will be applicable to the Buffalo Soldier Museum area. Maintenance of existing infrastructure such as improvements made to paved streets is not part of the project. The Museum District Walk Project scope does not include survey of existing infrastructure in particular underground utilities, although it will address cost of maintenance for streetscape improvements implemented by the Museum District Walk Project.

**Does this project include a signage system? The Clayton Library is part of the Museum District area. Signage should include non-museum institutions, as well. Is this part of the project?**

Graphics are a way of connecting museums located in the Museum District area. The Museum District Walk Project includes a conceptual phase for addressing way finding and establishing a signage system for the Museum District but it is not within the project scope of services to provide a way finding program. The project does offer an opportunity to work with public and private entities in developing a partnership that may address implementation of a way finding system for the Museum District. A District wide signage program will improve visitors' experience, its navigation, and offer a harmonious environment that can be identified as a special area. The conceptual design and recommendations developed through the Museum District Walk Project should develop prototypical design elements that will set the tone for future implementation of a way finding system.

**It is advantageous to bring in artists into the early planning process of the Museum District Walk Project. Will there be a lot of public installations of art?**

It was noted that the scope of work for the Museum District Walk Project is limited in implementing public art. However, the design team considers public art to be an important element of the project and opportunities for including public art in the District will be identified.

Opportunities should enhance the diverse artistic range of the Museum District, in ways that subtly foster the integrity found within the museums without detracting from their character. Artists interested in offering ideas are always welcome and comments should be addressed to the design team members.

**The Plaza Hotel located on Montrose presents safety concerns to local residents. Is there any planned improvements that will include enhancement of the Plaza Hotel?**

The Museum District Walk Project will address pedestrian safety in its concept development stages but it will not address particular areas such as the Plaza Hotel.

**Where will future town hall meetings be held?**

Two future town hall meetings will be held. On March 6, 2003, a presentation of conceptual design will be held in Rooms 1A and 1B at the Judson Robinson Community Center located at 2020 Hermann Drive, 77004. A Presentation of final design concepts will be held on May 8th, 2003.

In addition, future public involvement will be obtained through “walkability tours” scheduled on: February 24, March 24, and April 24.

**What is the time frame for this project?**

The design process is projected to take 8 months. The construction is projected to begin in the Spring 2004.